

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF ALABAMA
NORTHERN DIVISION

JEFFERY JAMES JACKSON

*

Plaintiff,

*

v.

* CIVIL ACTION NO. 2:05-CV-1138-F
(WO)

ELLEN I. BROOKS - D.A., *et al.*,

*

Defendants.

*

RECOMMENDATION OF THE MAGISTRATE JUDGE

Plaintiff filed this 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action on December 1, 2005. He seeks to challenge matters related to criminal proceedings which occurred between February 14, 2000 and June 16, 2002. Names as defendants are District Attorney Ellen Brooks, Deputy District Attorney Will Powell, John W. Hartley, Esq., and Aimee C. Smith, Esq. Plaintiff seeks monetary damages, declaratory and injunctive relief, and an order from this court. Upon review of the complaint, the court concludes that dismissal of this case prior to service of process is appropriate under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and (ii).¹

¹A prisoner who is allowed to proceed *in forma pauperis* in this court will have his complaint screened in accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). This screening procedure requires the court to dismiss a prisoner's civil action prior to service of process if it determines that the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary damages from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)-(iii).

I. DISCUSSION

A. *Claims Barred by the Statute of Limitations*

The allegations presented in the instant action are not a model of clarity. Nevertheless, from the facts presented by Plaintiff, the court gleans the following. On February 14, 2000 Plaintiff was scheduled for a criminal trial. Although he did not appear in court that day or see his attorney, John Hartley, Plaintiff contends that court records show that he entered a guilty plea on that date. Subsequently, on March 18, 2002, Plaintiff was arrested for failure to appear for sentencing. On March 28, 2002, the trial court corrected the allegedly erroneous guilty plea entry made February 14, 2000 and set it aside. The trial court then appointed attorney Aimee Smith to represent Plaintiff on the failure to appear charge. Plaintiff asserts that he expressed to Ms. Smith his desire to proceed to trial on this charge which was scheduled for June 20, 2002 but complains that she “used deciet [sic] to obtain guilty plea, [on] June 16, 2002.” (Doc. No. 1.) Plaintiff’s claims are barred by the statute of limitations.

While there is no express period of limitations in the Civil Rights Act, federal courts generally apply the most appropriate state statute of limitations to a claim filed under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *See Wilson v. Garcia*, 471 U.S. 261 (1985); *Burnett v. Grattan*, 468 U.S. 42 (1984).

Federal courts must look to state law to determine, first, what statute of limitations is applicable, and second, whether that limitations period is tolled. *Whitson v. Baker*, 755 F.2d 1406.

1409 (11th Cir. 1985). . . . Alabama law [] provides that the applicable limitations period is the one in effect when the claim is filed, not when the cause of action arose. *Tyson v. Johns Manville Sales Corp.*, 399 So.2d 263, 269-70 (Ala.1981).

Dukes v. Smitherman, 32 F.3d 535, 537 (11th Cir. 1994). Alabama's general two year statute of limitations for personal injury actions is the most applicable to the case at bar. *Ala. Code* § 6-2-38(1). *See Owens v. Okure*, 488 U.S. 235, 249-250 (1989) (the proper statute of limitations for § 1983 actions is the forum state's general or residual statute of limitations for personal injury actions); *see also Lufkin v. McCallum*, 956 F.2d 1104, 1105 (11th Cir. 1992).

The alleged improprieties surrounding Plaintiff's criminal trial proceedings about which he complains occurred between February 14, 2000 and June 16, 2002. That portion of the tolling provision which previously applied to convicted prisoners was rescinded by the Alabama legislature on May 17, 1996. *See Ala. Code* § 6-2-8(a) (1975, as amended).² Consequently, the applicable statute of limitations expired on the claims arising from Plaintiff's various criminal proceedings, at the latest, in March and/or June 2004. Plaintiff filed the instant complaint on December 1, 2005. This filing, with respect to the claims presented, is more than 1 year after the applicable limitations period lapsed.

Unquestionably, the statute of limitations is usually a matter which may be raised as an affirmative defense. The court notes, however, that in an action proceeding under § 1983,

²The 1996 amendment, effective May 17, 1996, removed imprisonment as a disability entitled to protection under the tolling provision. In its pre-amendment form, the statute provided that "[i]f anyone entitled to commence any of the actions enumerated in this chapter . . . is . . . imprisoned on a criminal charge for any term less than life, he shall have three years, or the period allowed by law for the commencement of such action if it be less than three years, after the termination of such disability to commence an action . . ." *Ala. Code* § 6-2-8(a)(1975).

it may consider, *sua sponte*, affirmative defenses that are apparent from the face of the complaint. *Clark v. Georgia Pardons and Parole Board*, 915 F.2d 636, 640 n.2 (11th Cir. 1990); *see also Ali v. Higgs*, 892 F.2d 438 (5th Cir. 1990). “[I]f the district court sees that an affirmative defense would defeat the action, a section 1915[(e)(2)(B)(i)] dismissal is allowed.” *Clark*, 915 F.2d at 640. “The expiration of the statute of limitations is an affirmative defense the existence of which warrants dismissal as frivolous. *See Franklin [v. State of Oregon]*, 563 F. Supp. [1310] at 1330, 1332 [D.C. Or. 1983].” *Id.* at n.2. In analyzing § 1983 cases, “the court is authorized to test the proceeding for frivolousness or maliciousness even before service of process or before the filing of the answer.” *Ali*, 892 F.2d at 440. “It necessarily follows that in the absence of . . . defendants the . . . court must evaluate the merit of the claim *sua sponte*.” *Id.*

An early determination of the merits of an IFP proceeding provides a significant benefit to courts (because it will allow them to use their scarce resources effectively and efficiently), to state officials (because it will free them from the burdens of frivolous and harassing litigation), and to prisoners (because courts will have the time, energy and inclination to give meritorious claims the attention they need and deserve). ‘We must take advantage of every tool in our judicial workshop.’ *Spears [v. McCotter]*, 766 F.2d [179, 182 (5th Cir. 1985)].

Green v. McKaskle, 788 F.2d 1116, 1120 (5th Cir. 1986).

Based on the facts apparent from the face of the present complaint, Plaintiff has no legal basis on which to proceed as this action, with respect to those claims related to Plaintiff’s criminal court proceedings which occurred between February 2000 and June 2002, is brought more than one year after the violations about which he complains accrued. The

statutory tolling provision is unavailing. In light of the foregoing, the court concludes that Plaintiff's challenges to his 2000 and/or 2002 criminal court proceedings are barred by the applicable statute of limitations and these claims are, therefore, subject to dismissal as frivolous in accordance with the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Clark*, 915 F.2d 636; *see also Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989).\

B. The Challenge to Plaintiff's Conviction

To the extent Plaintiff's complaint may be construed to allege a claim that his June 16, 2002 guilty plea was involuntarily entered, he is entitled to no relief in this action. A challenge to Plaintiff's 2002 guilty plea and resulting conviction goes to the fundamental legality of this conviction. Consequently, this claims provide no basis for relief at this time. *Edwards v. Balisok*, 520 U.S. 641, 646 (1997); *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477 (1994); *Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 500 (1973).

In *Heck*, the Supreme Court held that a claim for damages challenging the legality of a prisoner's conviction or confinement is not cognizable in a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action "unless and until the conviction or sentence is reversed, expunged, invalidated, or impugned by the grant of a writ of habeas corpus" and complaints containing such claims must therefore be dismissed. *Id.* 512 U.S. at 483-489. The Court emphasized that "habeas corpus is the exclusive remedy for a state prisoner who challenges the fact or duration of his confinement and seeks immediate or speedier release, even though such a claim may come within the literal terms of § 1983" and, based on the foregoing, concluded that Heck's complaint was

due to be dismissed as no cause of action existed under section 1983. *Id.* at 481. In so doing, the Court rejected the lower court's reasoning that a section 1983 action should be construed as a habeas corpus action.

In *Balisok*, the Court concluded that a state prisoner's "claim[s] for declaratory [and injunctive] relief and money damages, . . . that necessarily imply the invalidity of the punishment imposed, is not cognizable under § 1983 . . ." unless the prisoner can demonstrate that the challenged action has previously been invalidated. *Id.* 520 U.S. at 648. Moreover, the Court determined that this is true not only when a prisoner challenges the judgment as a substantive matter but also when "the nature of the challenge to the procedures could be such as necessarily to imply the invalidity of the judgment." *Id.* at 645. The Court reiterated the position taken in *Heck* that the "sole remedy in federal court" for a prisoner challenging the constitutionality of his confinement is a petition for writ of habeas corpus. *Id.* Additionally, the Court "reemphasize[d] . . . that a claim either is cognizable under § 1983 and should immediately go forward, or is not cognizable and should be dismissed." *Id.* at 649.

To the extent the instant complaint contains a challenge to the constitutionality of Plaintiff's 2002 guilty plea and resulting conviction, a judgment in favor of Plaintiff in this cause of action would necessarily imply the invalidity of this conviction and any attendant sentence of imprisonment. It is clear from the complaint that the subject conviction has not been invalidated in an appropriate proceeding. Consequently, the instant collateral attack on Plaintiff's June 2002 guilty plea and resulting conviction is prohibited as habeas corpus

is the exclusive remedy for a state prisoner who challenges the legitimacy of the fact or duration of his present confinement. *Balisok*, 520 U.S. at 645; *Heck*, 512 U.S. at 481; *Preiser*, 411 U.S. at 488-490. Such challenge is, therefore, due to be dismissed under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

II. CONCLUSION

Accordingly, it is the RECOMMENDATION of the Magistrate Judge that:

1. The claims arising from Plaintiff's criminal trial proceedings which occurred between February 14, 2000 and June 16, 2002 be DISMISSED with prejudice pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) as the complaint is not filed within the time prescribed by the applicable period of limitations;

2. To the extent Plaintiff's complaint challenges the constitutionality of his June 16, 2002 guilty plea and conviction, this claim be DISMISSED without prejudice in accordance with the directives of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii); and

3. This case be DISMISSED prior to service of process pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and (ii).

It is further

ORDERED that the parties shall file any objections to the said Recommendation on or before **December 19, 2005**. Any objections filed must specifically identify the findings in the Magistrate Judge's Recommendation to which the party is objecting. Frivolous, conclusive or general objections will not be considered by the District Court. The parties are

advised that this Recommendation is not a final order of the court and, therefore, it is not appealable.

Failure to file written objections to the proposed findings and advisements in the Magistrate Judge's Recommendation shall bar the party from a de novo determination by the District Court of issues covered in the Recommendation and shall bar the party from attacking on appeal factual findings in the Recommendation accepted or adopted by the District Court except upon grounds of plain error or manifest injustice. *Nettles v. Wainwright*, 677 F.2d 404 (5th Cir. 1982). *See Stein v. Reynolds Securities, Inc.*, 667 F.2d 33 (11th Cir. 1982). *See also Bonner v. City of Prichard*, 661 F.2d 1206 (11th Cir. 1981, *en banc*), adopting as binding precedent all of the decisions of the former Fifth Circuit handed down prior to the close of business on September 30, 1981.

Done this 5th day of December 2005.

/s/ Delores R. Boyd
DELORES R. BOYD
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE